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SOME RESULTS OF RECENT ARCHAEOLOGICAL STUDIES BEARING UPON THE NEW TESTAMENT AND THE PRIMITIVE CHURCH

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We are apt to overlook the fact that the New Testament literature has an archaeological background. We understand Paul better when we remember that he lived in a real world and that it is possible to know something about that world by the study of its actual survivals. Not to understand this world of the New Testament is so far to fail in getting the full force of the New Testament. Through archaeology we enter history.

Was it not Oliver Wendell Holmes who some fifty years ago in a brilliant article defended the eccentric thesis that the spade had proved itself greater than the sword, and might soon prove itself even a rival of the pen?

If one had the wit of the Autocrat, such a thesis ought not now to be so difficult to sustain. The sword destroys, the spade reveals; the pen can only describe, the spade resurrects.

Too much, however, cannot be expected from a new science. Certainly the claims sometimes made that the spade has dug a grave for higher criticism is contrary to both rational conjecture and established fact. It is contrary to established fact, since otherwise it would have been known by the greatest archaeologists; it is contrary to rational conjecture, since it imagines that a well-established science can be overthrown by studies in another science occupying a very different field.

Yet while modern archaeology has not been a gravedigger for any sister-science, it has been an explorer which

has brought a new viewpoint to those interested in biblical study. Certainly this is undoubted as far as the Old Testament is concerned. It would be hard to name any modern Assyriologist or Egyptologist of fair fame who has not written something on the Old Testament connections with archaeology. A score of valuable and popularly written books, in large part overlapping each other, have appeared since the present century opened, elaborating these connections.

On the other hand, New Testament archaeology, as far as the more recent discoveries are concerned, has been almost wholly neglected except by specialists who for the most part have hidden their works in learned foreign reviews or ponderous monographs. With the exception of one rather widely read book by Deissmann, and a few others by such scholars as Ramsay, Lanciani, Marucchi, Moulton, etc., which have popularized certain limited fields of exploration, the ordinary English or American theologian has not had much reason to suppose that

archaeology has done anything very important during the last half-century in the illumination or corroboration of the New Testament.

Hogarth in his valuable summary of archaeological discovery¹ only gives a few pages to discoveries connected with the New Testament, and Barton in his stately treatise² gives but little more space to this subject. Even Kaufmann's *Handbuch* and Leclercq's *Manuel*, the two latest and greatest foreign works exclusively devoted to Christian archaeology,³ are entirely inadequate in their treatment of the more recent discoveries.

Kaufmann mentions only one single inscription discovered by Sir William M. Ramsay, and Leclercq relegates all the modern researches of this celebrated archaeologist to a few isolated footnotes, while neither of these scholars even so much as mentions Deissmann or Grenfell and Hunt, nor makes any use of the vast treasures recently uncovered at Oxyrhynchus, Socnopaei Nesus, and other Egyptian towns. These works are almost appalling in their minute knowledge of every smallest bit of literature coming from the last and previous centuries which touch the architecture and art of early Christianity; yet it is probably safe to say that three-fourths of all the material utilized comes from Italy, and nine-tenths of it from researches made previous to the modern archaeological renaissance.

This may sound like criticism, but it is not so intended. The traditional

method followed for centuries by classical and Christian archaeologists almost necessarily excluded much of the new material. Leclercq definitely ruled out of consideration all epigraphic texts, and both Kaufmann and Leclercq excluded the papyri—which have proved so brilliantly illuminating—as not fitting into their plans. This was entirely in accordance with classical precedent⁴ and has certain good arguments behind it; exhaustive technical treatises must be necessarily limited in scope. Yet the works of such learned and patient scholars are invaluable. Without such thorough monographs the more recent discoveries would have been almost valueless. All modern archaeological interpretations rest upon these most assured results, and cannot, except in a very limited way, claim equality, much less pre-eminence, in importance. All recent researches rest upon these conclusions as the final story in the Woolworth building rests upon those which underlie it, and when measured either by voluminousness or by artistic value the modern discoveries look pitifully few and poor as compared with the old.

The new discoveries have added next to nothing to our knowledge of ancient Christian art or architecture. Not even one fine church has been added to the list long known, nor has it added much to our collection of statues and bas-reliefs and mosaics, and nothing whatever worthy of mention to the store of jewels and silver caskets, gilded glasses,

¹ D. G. Hogarth, *Authority and Archaeology*, 1899.

² George A. Barton, *Archaeology and the Bible*, 1916.

³ Carl Maria Kaufmann, *Handbuch der christlichen Archäologie*, 1905; Dom. H. Leclercq, *Manuel d'archéologie chrétienne* (two vols.), 1907.

⁴ Cf. R. Cagnat et V. Chapot, *Manuel d'archéologie romaine*, Paris, 1906.

medallions, and second-, third-, or fourth-century Christian portraits. With the one single exception of the Chalice of Antioch, nothing has been found comparable to the Cup of Nero or the Chalice of Cologne, and the other rich gold and silver work from the early centuries, and only in one locality have any silks or tapestries been found at all comparable with the wonderful palls and ecclesiastical vestments already known. No marvelous ivory carvings such as those found at Ravenna, or sepulchral inscriptions such as have been known for centuries in the catacombs, or wonderful Christian tombs such as De Vogüé found nearly a century ago in Syria, have come to light in recent times; while the gravestones of Asia Minor and the pathetically ugly churches and pictures and Christian relics revealed in Egypt look cheap indeed as contrasted with the noble basilicas and splendid sarcophagi of Italy.

Must we acknowledge, therefore, that the boasted new discoveries are few and unimportant? Yes, they are both few and unimportant as far as artistic or architectural technique is concerned, but neither few nor unimportant in their uncovering of the common life of the common people, and in the novel and unexpected epistolary and business revelations autographically offered to us from the first and later Christian centuries.

In the present article we shall try briefly to epitomize some of the more valuable results of recent archaeological research so far as the New Testament and the early church are concerned, thus bringing into the sun the importance of this too long-neglected branch of ministerial study.

1. *New light upon the grammar of the New Testament.*—New Testament archaeology has brought to view many Greek manuscripts from the first century, throwing a blazing light upon the grammatical forms common to the New Testament, thus giving a new impulse to New Testament criticism.

Nearly a dozen new Greek grammars have been published since the beginning of the twentieth century, each one of them showing the influence of the papyri. These thousands of newly discovered manuscripts, scores of which date from the first century, give us the vernacular of that period. Although it has been one hundred and forty years since the first written papyrus was brought to Europe, it has been less than twenty-five years since the connection between these documents and the New Testament has been demonstrated. It was Adolf Deissmann, a young candidate for the ministry at Marburg, who first recognized this connection—perhaps the most important single discovery of the last hundred years so far as the New Testament is concerned. Deissmann recognized that the New Testament was full of colloquialisms peculiar to the common people in or near the Apostolic age, and pointed out exhaustively in his two earlier books, written in 1895 and 1897, that the grammar of the papyri was the grammar of the New Testament.

Every Greek scholar from the days of Erasmus had known that the New Testament language differed in a marked degree from the classical Greek in its word-formation and in accidence, as well as in vocabulary. The strange ascendancy of the accusative, the blending of conjugations, the multiplication

of suffixes and prepositions, had clashed decisively with classical usage. Many of these new forms had been explained either as errors of copyists and "Semitisms" due to the fact that the New Testament writers were Hebrews, or as divinely inspired variations from pagan forms; but the discovery of the papyrus documents proved that such an explanation could no longer be counted sufficient.

The same double negatives and the same loose connections between subject and predicate which had been so confidently laid to the door of careless scribes were now found to be the ordinary language of the peasantry in the Apostolic age. The supposed Hebraic idioms were found, almost all of them, to be used freely in the papyri by non-Jews—men who were worshiping heathen gods and displaying the most heathenish characteristics.

The broken connections, variations in orthography, interchange of cases and the use of a great variety of prepositions—each of which had been supposed to teach some special spiritual lesson to believers—were now found to be merely the ordinary colloquial devices of the shopkeepers and middle-class letter writers of the era in which the New Testament literature had arisen.

This may seem to be a matter of comparatively small importance, but when we think of the tons of theological logomachy wasted on these grammatical variations the matter takes on a new value. The papyri show that through these discoveries the freer and less turbulent theology has been given its credentials by the holy oracles. The old confidence in esoteric and heavenly meanings to be drawn from certain

grammatical constructions has been broken, and many of the arguments which have formed the bases of controversies which have convulsed Christianity may now be thrown into the wastebasket. Greek grammar has become the modern irenicon between denominations.

We have not intended to defend Deissmann's original proposition that the New Testament documents were in every respect similar to the papyri. Wellhausen long ago keenly observed that the New Testament was written, not in the common vernacular but in the "vernacular lifted to literature." As I have elsewhere noted, the Greek of the New Testament compares in style and vocabulary with the papyri as the modern magazines of the better class compare in style and vocabulary with the spoken language. This permits in the Bible writers a beautiful simplicity and an occasional sublimity of expression never found in other papyri, while excluding the artificiality so often present in first-century classics.

Admitting such differences and also admitting certain Semitic influences, chiefly due to the Septuagint and to the Jewish origin of most New Testament writers, Greek experts acknowledge almost universally that the Synoptic Gospels and Paul's letters are more closely related in grammar and style to the papyri of the first and second centuries than either to the classical Greek or to the LXX. Many of Paul's "jumbled phrases" and the piling up of negatives and other non-classical idioms by other New Testament writers must be ascribed no longer to Hebrew influence, but to the uncouth, unrevised

vernacular which was commonly used by the common people of that era. Luke, though a Gentile, used these supposed Semitisms as freely as Matthew.

In at least one other direction the grammatical forms of the papyri have assisted New Testament criticism. They have proved that many of these supposed mistakes of the manuscripts or copyists—once a tantalizing thorn in the flesh of conservative expositors—are merely common constructions of the first-century vernacular offering an incidental and wholly unexpected mark of antiquity. Such, at any rate, is the decision of papyrological experts such as Moulton, Milligan, Sir F. G. Kenyon, etc., who feel themselves compelled, because of such peculiarities, to date all the New Testament documents, with a very few exceptions, back into the first century. In any case, whatever the final conclusion may be so far as John's Gospel, and the Pastoral Epistles are concerned, it is perfectly plain that the papyri have brought to us a new external, contemporaneous standard by which results may be reached, which is much more impersonal and reliable than that offered by the formerly popular Tübingen method.

2. *New light upon the literary habits of the first century.*—Many papyri are now available which discover to us the kind of pens and ink and the sizes of papyrus sheets used by the evangelists and other New Testament writers. The loss of the last page of Mark's Gospel in all ancient manuscripts is now seen to be probably due to the natural wear and tear which came upon the closing leaves of all ancient books. The mixing of paragraphs and sections in an

ancient writing, or the consolidation of two writings dealing with the same subject—noticeable in various places in the New Testament—may now be very naturally explained as we learn the size of the ordinary papyrus sheets and the habits of the scribes in the first and second centuries.

The common practice of writing by dictation may also explain certain marked variations in style in letters ascribed by tradition to the same author. It is easy to see that great stylistic differences might naturally result if the dictation were interrupted, or if the letter were dictated word for word, or only written or dictated in a rough draft to be elaborated and approved by the author later.

What would naturally happen in the latter case may probably be seen from Luke's report of Paul's speeches, and certainly from a number of autograph letters of the first century—as well as from some twentieth-century newspaper reports of modern sermons! That it was not uncommon to have letters of special interest copied more or less freely and sent on to other groups of friends—as some of Paul's letters are supposed to have been circularized—is shown by several interesting examples from early Christian centuries.

The lack of punctuation in ordinary letter-writing, few if any separations of words, many abbreviations, and no quotation marks in the non-literary papyri of the first century may also explain various marks previously regarded with suspicion when found in the New Testament documents.

In this connection it may be well to state that the general style of the

papyrus letters resembles in a marked way that of the New Testament letters. St. Paul is now proved to have been intimately familiar with the polite forms of epistolary correspondence. While Pliny, for example, was incomparably more brilliant in phrase and possessed a delicate sense of word-color almost wholly lacking in the works of the Tarsian writer, he was no more considerate of the forms of social intercourse than was the Apostle to the Gentiles.

Paul, as we now know, was an aristocrat legally endowed with certain rights and privileges (*πολίτης*) which the common resident of the city did not possess. If Ramsay is to be trusted when he declares that Tarsus was the only city at that period governed by its university, then Paul naturally from his earliest boyhood would have been accustomed to the classical style. That he could use this style he proved on various occasions. That he does not generally use an academic style in his intercourse with middle- or low-class correspondents is simply a proof that he had learned the art of sermonizing, and that he had better sense than some of his modern successors. There seem to be no very clear indications that Deissmann is correct in his supposition that the apostle had clumsy fingers unaccustomed to the use of the pen, or that his letters are stylistically or grammatically below those of the average middle-class citizen. Most of the available evidence seems to the writer opposed to this view.

3. *New light upon the New Testament text.*—We are not here concerned chiefly with the paleographic argument, although it may be well to state that the shape of the letters, character of abbreviations,

autographic peculiarities, and other marks found in New Testament manuscripts have induced several leading papyrologists to conclude that such manuscripts represent unrevised copies of first-century originals. This is a totally new argument for the antiquity of the New Testament documents, and possibly rests on insufficient data, since the first-century papyri are comparatively few. Yet this decision must be allowed to hold the field tentatively until contradictory evidence is produced.

Much more important than the foregoing is the light thrown by the new discoveries upon early forms of the New Testament Scripture. The writer has recently reported in detail upon portions of some sixty ancient New Testaments recently discovered. While most of these come from the sixth century and are therefore comparatively unimportant, there are on the whole a surprisingly large number of fragments from the third and fourth centuries, while some of the other manuscripts show the antiquity of their originals by their many variations from the Eastern and Western "standard" text.

Most of these texts are well written, many of them representing large church Bibles carefully prepared by well-educated scribes. By far the most valuable of these is the Washington Codex purchased in Egypt by Mr. C. L. Freer, of Detroit, in 1906, edited efficiently by Professor Henry A. Sanders, of the University of Michigan in 1908-9, and collated with the W and H text in a remarkably thorough manner by Professor E. J. Goodspeed, of the University of Chicago. This manuscript dates from either the fifth or the fourth

century—the judgment of experts perhaps inclining recently toward the later date—and in both size and textual importance is to be ranked with the three or four best-preserved uncials previously known.

In addition to these well-written Bibles made from carefully preserved originals and almost necessarily under scrupulous ecclesiastical supervision, we possess a considerable number of fragments from at least a dozen private New Testaments. At any rate this is the contention which the present writer has elaborated at length. Many of these are small books written on poor papyrus by poor penmen who either copied carelessly or had a poorly written original to copy.

The special importance of these ill-looking texts has never previously been recognized so far as the writer knows. Yet are they not supremely important? They came, all of them, from country towns in rather poverty-stricken districts far from the ecclesiastical capitals, and were evidently free from the priestly censorship which would naturally have been exerted on church manuscripts prepared in Alexandria, Antioch, Caesarea, or Rome.

If my contention is allowed we not only possess here some fragments of New Testaments a hundred years older than any Bible fragments ever before examined, but for the first time are now able to look upon leaves fallen from the New Testament which the common, ordinary Christians were using in their private devotions a century before Constantine. Even if it should be allowed that some of these little, poorly written books were used in the churches,

not by private owners, this would only emphasize the poverty of these small Egyptian towns far from Alexandria, and the small likelihood that such texts had been ecclesiastically constructed from some “authorized” type of text. Indeed the differences between these “poor men’s Bibles” also precludes any such supposition.

One thing that forces itself upon the student of these earliest fragments is this, that there seems to have been no adoration of the “letter” in those most ancient days now open to us. The text which we have here discovered is remarkably free, having evidently been written before what von Soden well calls the “mechanical Jewish dogma of inspiration” had been introduced. There is no counting of words or letters, and no settled or stiff form of text, such as seemed a little later so necessary to orthodoxy.

Another thing that is most surprising is the lack of startling text variations and contradictions. What had previously been proved true of the classics is now proved true of the New Testament, that the supposed text changes (other than merely local changes) due to personal prepossessions or heretical controversies are remarkably few. Indeed modern text critics are now saying that the changes made by ancient scribes are not much more marked than those made by modern text critics. It is now proved that half a century or more before Constantine began to use his royal influence toward text standardization and before either the Alexandrian or Antiochan “types” had come into general acceptance, these poor Egyptian Christians were using in every essential

exactly the same Gospels which we accept now. The many newly discovered Coptic New Testaments from the fourth century on confirm this conclusion.

4. *New light on the New Testament vocabulary.*—We have no space in which to develop these new meanings which must now be given to many of the old, well-known words. Those who have not followed the new discoveries may, however, be offered a taste from this feast of good things. Paul never said, "I have kept the faith" (in the sense of being doctrinally steadfast), but did say, "I have loyally guarded the trust." Peter spoke not of "spiritual" milk, but of unadulterated milk. James did not say that "the proving of your faith worketh patience," but that "genuine proved" faith worketh patience. The author of the Hebrews did not declare that faith is the "substance" of things hoped for, but that it is the "title deed" of things hoped for. Paul in his declaration that the "ends of the world are come unto us" (I Cor. 10:10) was not making a prophetic declaration that the apostles were living in the closing era of the world's history, but was uttering a joyous declaration that the apostles were heirs of all the "spiritual revenues" of the ages which had preceded them. Jesus is called, not the "captain" of our salvation, but the founder or originator of that salvation. God is not an "austere," but an "exacting," employer. Our calling and election are made, not merely "sure," but "legally secure."

One of the most interesting discoveries to many may be the fact that the phrase "If thou art the Son of God" (Matt. 4:3, 6) does not in any degree convey doubt as is convincingly proved from the

papyri—to the confusion of many sermonizers!

5. *The theology of the early church.*—In this direction the returns are not so brilliant and varied as might have been expected. When one thinks of the vast quantities of Christian texts and inscriptions which have recently come to light from the first to the fourth century, it would seem only reasonable to hope that at least a few extended references might be found to early discussions concerning the change of the weekly rest day, mode of baptism, and character and limitations of New Testament inspiration, or at least some echoes of the debates connected with the rise of the episcopacy and papacy. Unfortunately, however, these early records are generally as bald of theological novelty as those coming from the pilgrims to the Holy Land two centuries later.

Just one startling new point stands out from the papyri of the first century: the titles given to Jesus in the New Testament are exactly the same as those given to deified Roman emperors at this same period. It is now for the first time seen that when these Bible writers declared Jesus to be "the Lord," in their baptismal service, they were affirming him to be more than human. He, not the emperor, was "great God and Savior." He, not Caesar, was the imperial Lord to whom every knee must bow. This new discovery does not, of course, prove the deity of Christ, but it adds dignity and strength to the modern argument for his deity since there need be no further urgency of isolated and widely separated texts—many of which are of disputed inter-

pretation—in order to prove that the church of the first century unequivocally accepted the deity of Jesus Christ in full measure.

The theology of the church at the opening of the second century has been shown to us in a very unexpected way by the discovery in 1909 of a Syriac document (*Odes of Solomon*) dating from this era and representing, as scholars now generally acknowledge, the earliest Christian hymn book. These hymns or odes are full of mystic references such as meet us in John's Gospel, and as Dr. E. A. Abbott has clearly proved (*Diatessarica*, IX) contain explicit teachings of Christ's deity, pre-existence, virgin birth, etc., as well as references to the doctrine of the Trinity. The daringly picturesque and unorthodox symbolism used by the primitive Christians is displayed in a marked way in a reference to the Trinity in Ode XIX.

The Son is the cup and he who was milked is the Father; and the Holy Spirit milked him; because his breasts were full and it did not seem good to him that his milk should be spilt for naught. . . . The womb of the Virgin caught it and received conception and brought forth, etc.¹

The interaction between Eastern and Western art, including theological symbolism, was first prominently brought out by Strzygowski, but has received much illustration in recent years. The discoveries at Achmim-Panapolis have also shown the close relation between the worship of early Christianity and the ancient Egyptians. Especially in their

doctrine of the future life these early believers came into close connection with the priests and devotees who taught in the sacred colleges of Memphis and Thebes.²

6. *The environment of the early church.*

—This represents perhaps the most fascinating new knowledge which has been revealed to us by the papyri. It is not chiefly valuable because we here get some definite outside information as to many New Testament characters, such as Sergius Paulus, Caiaphas, Quirinius, etc.; nor because we are enabled to fix with complete certainty the birth of Jesus in 9-6 B.C.; nor because we have been able to clear up certain disputed questions concerning social and political customs; but because we have thus been introduced to the home life of the common people, and have received a new vision of the real conditions under which the disciples of Jesus lived and under which they fought a victorious battle for the new faith. The wages of day laborers, the ordinary price of sparrows in bunches of ten, the cost of vegetables and oil in the open market as contrasted with the cost at private sale, the monopoly on wheat, alum, perfume, and eggs, the branch laundries, branch banks, and municipal bakeries whose records have been unearthed, the mortgages and wills and private letters showing in detail the life of the poorer classes, the accounts of rich banquets given by the "freedmen" and the unspeakable revelations from the theatrical plays and police courts

¹ For a translation of the entire ode and many others of these Christian hymns see Cobern, *New Archeological Discoveries and Their Bearing upon the New Testament and upon the Life and Times of the Primitive Church* (1917), pp. 300-320.

² Cf., Al. Gayet, *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* (1908), pp. 121-34.

have given to us a series of moving pictures showing the Bible narratives and the early Christian missionaries in a new and unexpected framework.

7. *Growth and development of early Christianity.*—Though comparatively few Christian records date from the second or third century, not only the environment of the Christian church, but its inward movements during this era can now be rather clearly visualized. The small, cheap chapel with its rough altar—probably representing the stone on which a martyr was killed—such as was found by Howard Crosby Butler at Sardis; the ordinary, cheap grave-stones with their simple epitaphs such as are found in Asia Minor; the inscriptions in the catacombs with their undeveloped symbolism and undeveloped creed; the poor burial places in Egypt, showing the beginning of ascetic customs and the influence of rival religions: all of these give the impression of poverty, simplicity, earnestness, and spiritual vigor.

But as we pass to the fourth and later centuries, we get a glaring display of the sudden growth in wealth and influence of these Christian believers, and an inside view of the process by which ecclesiastical domination fastened itself upon the entire social and political structure. By the end of the third, or the middle of the fourth, century Christianity had so permeated Phrygia and certain parts of Syria, and entire towns had become so fully Christian, that all the city officers and shopkeepers were of this faith, and all the social and business life was controlled by them. Soon we find the Christians living in palaces which almost rivaled those of

the Roman nobles, while their churches built in honor of King Jesus had become rivals and in some respects imitations of the imperial palaces of Rome.

Such are a few of the directions in which recent archaeological study has thrown light upon the New Testament and the early church. If space permitted it would be easy to indicate other social, educational, economic, political, and moral connections. It would also be easy to devote an entire article to the new proof which has been given of the accuracy of the New Testament records.

It is clearly evident that even the most vulgarly inartistic of the new discoveries may be of priceless value. The rude drawings scrawled on the walls of Nero's palace, or the poorest oil portraits found at Antinoë, thrill one more than the most elaborate pictures of St. Peter or St. Hippolytus. The little tag about the neck of the Christian mummy shipped down the Nile to the "Land of Osiris" is theologically more significant than the most magnificent baptistry preserved at Constantinople or Rome. The letter of Hilarion (1 B.C.) unconcernedly suggesting to his wife that his grandchild, if a girl, should be thrown out on the road to die; the jagged ostrakon, dating from the time of Domitian, containing the tax record of "Jesus, son of Papias"; or the worm-eaten papyri or pieces of a broken pot on which some poor Christians of the third and fourth centuries painfully transcribed the precious words of a Gospel which they were too poor to buy—these are worth more as archaeological discoveries than the ivory throne of Maximian or the sarcophagus of Pope Damasus.